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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000062

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TAGS: [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: CHUNG MONG-JOON: DELEGATION LEADER, PRESIDENTIAL
ASPIRANT

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On January 21-23 National Assembly member and presidential aspirant Chung Mong-joon will lead a Presidential Transition Committee delegation to Washington, DC. A similar delegation visited in 2003 on behalf of then President-elect Roh Moo-Hyun and met with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Vice-President. In meetings with Chung it is clear this delegation will measure its success by securing an equal (or greater) number of high-level meetings as the Roh delegation. Indeed, as one of the first U.S.-ROK government-to-government interactions under this new administration, the tenor of the delegation's reception in Washington will be a demonstration to the Korean people of how responsive the U.S. plans to be to Lee Myung-bak's promises to "upgrade" the alliance and reinforce bilateral cooperation. END SUMMARY.

THE MAN

¶2. (SBU) Chung Mong-joon, one of the sons of the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate, is a fifth-term lawmaker with presidential aspirations. Indeed, most pundits have designated him as Lee Myung-bak's successor-designate to counter Grand National Party (GNP) heavyweight Park Geun-hye in the 2012 presidential election. Chung leads the Korea Football Association and was credited with the success of the 2002 Korea-Japan World Cup. With his popularity high that year, Chung mounted a formidable third-party campaign in the 2002 presidential race. He ultimately withdrew and endorsed Roh Moo-hyun, only to withdraw his support the day before the polls opened. Since then Chung has been scathing in his criticism of Roh and has mentioned in separate meetings with the Ambassador that he feels personally responsible for putting Roh in power and for the many mistakes of the Roh administration.

¶3. (C) Chung has an immense personal fortune (estimated conservatively at \$250 million) and a playboy image. In fact, some political contacts say he has a bit of a drinking problem. He was first elected to the National Assembly in 1988 from Ulsan, home of Hyundai Heavy Industries, and has since been reelected to every term since then. Cynics believe that Ulsan voters feel they cannot afford to bite the hand that feeds them. Chung was a primary school classmate of Park Geun-hye and was rumored to be helping her campaign

during the GNP primary. However he clearly pledged his allegiance to Lee Myung-bak (and joined the GNP) a few weeks before the Presidential election, and has emerged as a close Lee adviser as well as heir-apparent.

THE DELEGATION

¶4. (SBU) The transition delegation will also include former Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the U.S. Han Sung-joo (now Acting President of Korea University), Representative Hwang Jin-ha (a retired General and defense specialist), MOFAT Director General for North America Cho Byung-jae, and Yonsei Professor and close Lee advisor Kim Woo-sang. Earlier this week, Chung noted that it would be very helpful to President-elect Lee Myung-bak if the delegation was able to have high-level meetings, which they hope would be substantive discussions and not just photo opportunities. He said that the USG and transition team needed to work hard to show people that this administration would be different and that the alliance will be better for it. He and Han both hinted strongly that the analogous delegations to Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow would expect to meet top leaders.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) As with all rich and powerful men in Korea, there are many rumors that surround Chung, most related to his reputation as a bon vivant and womanizer. As the son of Hyundai founder Chung Ju-young and his girlfriend, Chung has long had a chip on his shoulder, but has turned out to be one

of the most successful of the founder's offspring. That said, Chung is only as deep on substance as he needs to be, and, in fact, seems to contribute stature rather than intellect to the delegation bound for Washington next week. In recent meetings with the Ambassador, Chung let Han Sung-joo do most of the talking, a trend which will likely continue during the delegation's visit to Washington.

¶6. (C) Chung's increased stature in the Lee Myung-bak transition means two things: first, that Chung has been promised something -- most likely Lee's support in 2012 for another run at the presidency, and possibly the prime minister's position at some point; and second, that Lee Myung-bak's betrayal of Chung's father in the 1992 election, when Lee supported Kim Young-sam instead of Chung Ju-young, has been forgiven. Lee's alliance with Chung is helpful in that he serves as a check on Park Geun-hye's power and helps "clean" Lee's image -- while scandals and graft can be forgiven relatively easily here, betrayal of a mentor is not taken so lightly. Whether or not he is ultimately successful in ending up in the Blue House, for now Chung is emerging as a highly influential figure in the new administration.

RECOMMENDATION

¶7. (C) While our decisions should not be driven by Koreans' status-consciousness or the comparisons they will make to 2003, we believe that President-elect Lee's clear desire to establish closer, more trusting relations with the USG justifies arranging meetings for Chung's delegation to meet with very senior USG officials -- i.e., the Vice-President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security

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Advisor, and others -- as schedules permit.
VERSHBOW